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Tolstoy's Tropics of Suddenness: The Unexpected in the World of the Law

"Suddenly" is usually treated as a prerogative of Dostoevsky's work. There are many studies that deal with this particular topic. V. N. Toporov explains that in the world of Dostoevsky "suddenly" is probability. It is the meaning of numerous "sudden instances," the alignment of plot and hero in the probable world (Топоров 198).¹

Tolstoy put into wide circulation Pushkin's remark about how Tatyana struck him when she rejected Onegin; he absolutely did not expect it (Маковицкий 143).² He himself provides the key to this unexpected motivation: Recall Tolstoy's famous letter to Nikolai Strakhov in which, in connection with Vronsky's suicide, he reflects on the text's "labyrinth of linkages" (PSS 62: 269). This presents a key to understanding many of the complex acts and events in their interwoven functions and motivations. Here we will pause over only one of many representative episodes in which events appear unexpectedly, but are motivated everywhere in different ways.

One of the biggest surprises, or more precisely, incongruities in the world of Tolstoy is Pierre Bezukhov's arrival on the field of Borodino. What could be more absurd? Is it not peculiar that the most peaceful moments in the novel occur when the greatest number of professional warriors is present?

One such moment of decision is when Pierre is surrounded by the chaos of Moscow. Among his various impressions is the execution of the miserable Frenchman who is thrown to the mob as a spy. Here is the point of origin when Pierre

decided once and for all that he could no longer remain in Moscow and that he would now go to the army, which he thought he either told the coachman, or about which he believed the coachman must have known. (PSS 11: 183)

The significance of this rests in the fact that he does not understand how such a fateful decision had been made: Pierre does not know if it was he or his driver who decided to go. “Something” decided in him, and the author refuses any motivation. This is a classical manifestation of the “trope of suddenness.”

In order to explain the “mysterious basis of this decision” (Genette’s formulation), we need to trace the “labyrinth of linkages” directly from its source. Immediately, we are faced with the necessity of slow reading and “petty” analysis. This labyrinth consists of a set of many links, of episodes and micro-episodes that are not concentrated, but scattered through the text. This dispersal, moreover, is itself significant.

Pierre’s personality and artistry were already made clear two books earlier in the epic. Pierre is the most Tolstoyan of Tolstoy’s heroes. Pierre is the most complete embodiment of the human Tolstoy. Pierre is “the moving type” (Genette 308). This very capacity for variation appears as an invariable property of Pierre’s personality. The Borodino moment thus is not the total of Pierre’s life, but a major fracture.

This, of course, is a strange act. But what is an act in the world of Tolstoy? The finest Tolstoyan heroes are not inactive, but their activity is not commensurate with their spiritual substance. In Tolstoy the inner does realize itself fully on the outside, remaining within itself as the highest value. Every separate act is motivated not only by a

momentary situation, but by the individual personality of the individual and by his entire life.

The first, most obvious level of motivation is character. Tolstoy delineates an innate and adaptive character. “What is innate character (what is acquired)? From previous existences a storehouse of life is handed down.”³ Pierre’s innate character appears in full within the first two volumes, before the beginning of the Patriotic War of 1812. Pierre’s impulsiveness and the wide range of his life experiences are important to understanding this situation—from the depths of hypochondria to the sudden outbreak of madness.

If the act does not correspond to the character then the character is doomed to failure. So Pierre’s idea to kill Napoleon is “an impossible matter—not due to its difficulty, but rather because it is incommensurate with [Pierre’s] nature” (PSS 11: 391).

Character is not, however, even the last level of depth. In A. V. Mikhailov’s fundamental work, “From the History of Character: The Problem of Character in Art,” the fate of character is traced—its philosophy and aesthetic fulfillment in various forms of art from antiquity to the present day. The author points to something deeper than character, to something to which he refuses to give a definition. Mikhailov writes:

[It] lies somewhere in the inscrutable and murky depths of personality, perhaps as its foundation, maybe the result of their relative sum, or as something absolutely submerged in the isolated darkness of the individual’s world. The process is complex and deep, we can glimpse it only through narrow slits that you cannot really call real windows. (265–266)

By way of such “narrow slits,” such an attempt to listen to the subterranean stream may be considered a breakthrough into the subconscious, something Tolstoy discovered long before Freud. One could cite numerous examples here. Repressed instincts hidden from one’s own feeling, from false

motives—everything organically enters into the anthropology of Tolstoy.

Mikhailov's discourse proceeds to a level deeper than either the subconscious or collective unconscious: "In the internal there is an even deeper generative beginning" (187, 189). The scholar refuses to define precisely what the "core" is, what constitutes "the deeper generative beginning." Perhaps, however, this can be neither formalized nor defined. This discourse, apparently, concerns man's hidden engine, concerns something deeper than character and its formation.

An artist of Tolstoy's caliber knows this; he knows what it is, what is "undefinable" (PSS 10: 212). Definition, as we know, limits and can, roughly speaking, distort its subject. Consider, for example, Tolstoy's deliberately vague favorite expression: "something of life" (PSS 48: 122). Reflecting on the different levels of depth in a person, Tolstoy suggested that this last one, the level he named the "force of life," remains incomprehensible until the end. There is something which the person cannot understand, let alone define, but that he, nevertheless, *knows* better than anything else in the world. It is that which life gives us and about which we speak, my individual "I" (PSS 45: 13). Tolstoy rightly says that if man conquers his aspirations and acts contrary to them it is because he does so according to the strongest motive. Every act thus is a consequence of the strongest motivation. This, indeed, is truth, for if you look at the person like a self-acting machine without taking into consideration that which makes the machine work, without asking yourself what is the force that drives the machine and "motivates action," this question remains unanswered (PSS 55: 183). Indeed, why in peaceful Pierre did the most powerful of impulses, the desire to go to war, appear?

In other words, the undefined center of Pierre's self, that which is deeper than character, is "knowledge," something both he and Tolstoy know about themselves: "In me there are no limits" (PSS

52: 260). That is to say, there is in each person a sense of longing for that which "never was and never will be," but which, nevertheless, is.⁴ As the late Tolstoy argued, "Man is the whole and the part of everything."⁵ As "a man of Tolstoy," Pierre knows this to be true. Pierre arrives at this formulation during his dispute with Prince Andrei at Bogucharovo: "I constitute a part of the vast, harmonious whole" (PSS 10: 116).

Pierre's whole spiritual development leads to the moment when that "living-conscious" feeling is becoming ever more aware and demanding of its own realization. This feeling is what leads Pierre to the masons, as well as to one of the most important experiences of Borodino—his captivity and contact with those whom he once called *them*: "And all of this is mine, and all this is in me, and all of it is me" (PSS 12: 106).⁶ There it was born in the subconscious, in the early morning dream, the word, retracting from the essence of that about which his soul always languished to join together.

This is Pierre's personality as it was coming together by the beginning of the Patriotic War of 1812. Pierre sees the comet as a sign that "now we are children of the Earth and eternally children of the world" (PSS 52: 260). Daily life ascends to a higher dimension.

The time between the beginning of the war and Pierre's sudden decision to go to the army is filled with an abrupt change of spiritual states and irrational impulses. Due to the discrete nature of the narrative, the fragmentary episodes in which Pierre appears, it is as if during his absence in the text something in him matures. He enters into this new epoch of self-development with a joyous feeling of impending disaster—finally, latently realizing itself in him is the inner knowledge of the fact that he constitutes a "part of the vast harmonious whole." That is why he must do something. With every individual episode there is a new solution to the question "what must I do?" Only one decision is rejected—enlistment in military service. There are many reasons for this, all

of them mentioned in the text. The most rational decisions indicate that there is something central and all-defining, albeit irrational: I desire but I do not desire. Consequently, even when the solitaire cards indicated that he was to join the army, he did not go. What consciousness does not accept, the subconscious spurns. But together they demand some type of action to which it is indifferent until this moment. The decisive act appears unmotivated, the purest manifestation of suddenness.

This explanation may give synergy to a modern worldview. Everything—Pierre's identity as it developed towards this point and everything experienced by him since the beginning of the war—is, in the language of synergy, an overstressed system. The system approaches the point of bifurcation, which is to say, a fork in the road, and is in a pre-launch state of readiness. In the points of bifurcation “appear the possibility and necessity of random selection” (Чернявский 63). In the language of synergy, selection is random, emergent. It suddenly emerges somewhere on the side, deriving not from the present; it is something that defines the entire fate of the system. For this, a small resonating effect is necessary and sufficient (Князева 40–47). The impression of the Frenchman's execution appears as just such a small resonating effect and emergent trigger mechanism.

The third volume of the epic, directly devoted to the Patriotic War of 1812, begins with a large philosophical digression about that which appears as the cause of actions. There is no cause. All is just a coincidence of those conditions within which every living, organic, and elemental event takes place. This is said about historical events, but it also occurs in the events that constitute the lives of individual people. Pierre's investigative act appears as confirmation of this: There is no cause; there is only the coincidence of the cause.

But thinking about the aggregate of causes complements the famous Tolstoyan reasoning about the “labyrinth of linkages.” Namely, the

“labyrinth of linkages” defines the principle underlying synergy, “from complexity to perplexity.” So too with “coincidence” and “labyrinth.” In the artistic whole of the epic Tolstoy does not add causes; rather, he *intertwines* them. When he goes to the army, Pierre does not know that there he will join together and find happiness, and thus will find the path to the center of his being, which will help address his raft of torturous questions. It is as if the causes are absent and the goal is unknown to the hero.

Neither individual, nor character appears as defined, but is only part of the aesthetic whole of the book. *War and Peace* is a people's epic because in the center of the great event of national history a professional soldier could not have appeared, but only an individual representing peace and world. Pierre does not fight, he sees and comprehends meanings. Despite how out of place Pierre would seem, especially upon first glance, Tolstoy leads him to the field of Borodino. From the perspective of a single person, namely, Pierre Bezukhov, this was an accident. But when looked at from the elevated position of the epic, it is not an accident, but poetic need. This is how in the epic two artistic tasks intertwine—the anthropological and aesthetic wholes.

The root system of a sudden act has branches at all strata of life and at different levels of depth. This deep “labyrinth of linkages” was analyzed by the author in all of its elements, but—and this as a matter of principle is especially important—the aggregate of these elements is not concentrated in one place, but is spread out in various fragments of the text. This creates a broad and solid foundation of laws upon which undisputable unexpectedness stands.

However paradoxical the situation, no matter how strange the act, the reader does not linger over the trope of “suddenness;” everything to him is clear and understandable. According to Tolstoy,

the main property of art is to infect. Consequently, it seems natural to the “infected reader,” who does not step beyond the border of “how it usually happens” in Tolstoy.

Like any other, Tolstoy’s world shakes with unpredictable actions and events. And this does not refute the truth that in this work reigns the spirit of the general law. The all-encompassing epic art of Tolstoy reflects the laws of the universe, according to which unexpectedness is as rooted in existence as a stable state. “Suddenness” does not oppose “how it usually is;” it absorbs it. The reader can nearly miss this “suddenness” because he has entered the general spirit of epic laws.

We started with a reference from Dostoevsky. The trope of “suddenness” is another motif in the opposition of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky; it is natural to compare and contrast, but artificial when they make a choice and render a preference. We therefore conclude with a fragment from a letter from Thomas Mann, who is often thrown together with his brother, Heinrich: “I stood akimbo and remembered Goethe’s words about the Germans’ stupid argument over who is greater, he or Schiller: “They should be glad to have both of these guys”” (Манн 362).

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Notes

1. For a complete version, see Сливицкая (“Неожиданное” 3–14).
2. Translator’s note: For reasons of accessibility, I have deliberately cited the alternative version of Pushkin’s remark about the way Tatyana surprised him. The original that Slivitskaya cites in the article—“Татьяна ‘удрала штуку’”—is idiomatic and does not translate easily into English.
3. From Tolstoy’s conversation with Korolenko in August, 1910. Korolenko: “You gave types of ‘changing people’” (Bezukhov). Tolstoy: “But a type remains a

type: not ‘changing,’ but moving.” For details, see Маковцкий 320.

4. Tolstoy recalls the delightful words of his brother, Sergey Nikolayevich: “Music is the reminiscence of that which never was and the dreams that never will be” (Маковцкий 199).

5. Similarly, see Сливицкая (“Истина” 8–11).

6. This conforms to new developments in the philosophy of the subject, transpersonal psychology. According to Ken Wilber, “the subject departs the boundaries of the personal principle;” the subject’s “hidden” part is identical to the absolute and ultimate reality of the universe. “On this level, the subject is identified with the universal, as the one, or rather, the all-in-one.” See Налимов 107, 113, 114.

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